

The Need for Reducing and Eliminating Single-Use Plastics and Reducing the Strain on Virginia's Landfill Capacity

Plastic pollution is a problem and we cannot recycle our way out of it. Even with companies and governments making commitments to reduce plastic pollution, at least 22 million tons of waste will enter U.S. waterways over the next 10 years. With no improvements at all, and the waste management we have in place today, 99 million tons of plastic waste would end up in the environment by 2030. All of the things that make plastic so versatile also make it an even bigger problem in the environment, because of its durability, it is virtually indestructible.

Plastic production has increased steadily since the 1950s and seven billion of the 8.8 billion tons of plastic produced by 2017 became waste. Most plastic does not biodegrade, so this problem will not just go away. Even when plastic does break down, it becomes more problematic and more difficult to remove from the environment. To address a problem this big requires a fundamental shift in how people make, use and discard plastic.

Plastic's Low Recycling Rate

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's most current nationwide data, the recycling rate for plastics is relatively low (8.7 percent). The rates for certain types of plastics was higher, with polyethylene terephthalate (PET) plastic bottles and jars at 29.1 percent and high-density polyethylene (HDPE) plastic bottles at 29.3 percent.

In 2018, about 4.2 million tons of plastic bags, sacks and wraps were generated, while only 0.42 million tons were recycled, 0.74 million tons were combusted with energy recovery and 3.04 million tons were landfilled. The recycling rate for plastic bags, sacks and wraps was 10 percent in 2018.

Reducing the Strain on Virginia's Landfill Capacity

Landfills are associated with pollution risks to soil, air and water as well as odors and increased traffic from heavy trucks loaded with landfill-bound waste. Unless properly constructed, maintained and monitored over a long period of time, landfills can leak highly contaminated leachate into the groundwater and possibly emit air pollutants.

Based on DEQ's reporting data, a total of 22,530,150.85 tons of solid waste was received at Virginia's permitted solid waste management facilities during calendar year 2019. Of this total, 74 percent originated in the Commonwealth and 26 percent from jurisdictions. The total amount of solid waste received increase by 3.32 percent compared to 2018.

The amount of waste coming to Virginia landfills has been increasing. At the same time, the remaining lifespan for Municipal Solid Waste (MSW) landfills is decreasing at an alarming rate. In 2018, MSW landfills were predicted to have 23.4 years of capacity remaining; however, one year later, that predicted capacity had dropped to 20.6 years.

Virginia wants to expand the life span of existing landfills through waste reduction and diversion as opposed to building new landfills. Constantly increasing waste disposal and building new landfills is not sustainable. The 2020 Waste Diversion Task Force was tasked with examining Virginia's status as a prime destination for out-of-state waste and exploring ways in which it can be diverted from Virginia's landfills. Virginia State Agencies and Institutions are working to reduce waste generation and lead by example.

Sources:

- [Plastic Pollution is a Huge Problem -- and It's Not Too Late to Fix It \(National Geographic\)](#)
- [Advancing Sustainable Materials Management: Facts and Figures Report \(EPA\)](#)